



DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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State, federal agencies summarize environmental assessment of hurricane impacted areas of southeast La.

BATON ROUGE – State and federal agencies came together today to announce the results of an environmental assessment of conditions in southeast Louisiana following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Results of the assessment indicate that there are generally no unacceptable long-term health risks directly attributable to environmental contamination resulting from the storms. The one exception noted is the area undergoing cleanup for an oil spill. The assessment was based on the review of more than a thousand environmental samples collected and analyzed over the past months.

Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen, head of the Hurricane Katrina relief effort, spearheaded the multi-agency project which was led by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. The environmental summary was completed with assistance from the Centers for Disease Control, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The assessment is based on outdoor environmental conditions existing in Orleans, St. Bernard, Jefferson and Plaquemines Parishes flooded by Katrina. After analyzing more than a thousand samples, each for hundreds of contaminants, the agencies agreed that if people avoid obvious signs of hazardous materials, practice good personal hygiene and use common sense, exposure to the environment should not cause any long-term health effects. Some people may experience short-term effects related to dust, pollen and mold – which are prevalent because of the flooding and time of year. However, the majority of outdoor environmental samples, except for those in isolated areas, show pre-Katrina levels.

Many of the contaminants that were detected in the soil and sediment samples, such as metals like lead and arsenic, petroleum related constituents and pesticides are commonly found in older, densely populated areas. Most of the contaminants are at pre-Katrina levels and would not be expected to result in adverse health effects. In areas where samples exceeded DEQ or EPA risk criteria, proper steps will be taken to further study and address the situation.

DEQ and EPA have conducted extensive air sampling and found that southeast Louisiana meets all federal requirements for primary pollutants. Immediately after the storm there were some elevated levels of petroleum-related chemicals around the Murphy Oil spill in St. Bernard Parish. However, currently all toxic air pollutants meet EPA and DEQ air-quality standards.

Although there are no floodwaters left in the impacted areas, samples of those waters were high in bacteria. This is common in any flood situation in which the floodwaters commingle with sewage. Sampling of the floodwaters showed no reason for concerns for toxicity. Results from seafood sampling in Lake Pontchartrain, Lake Borgne, nearby estuaries, and along the Gulf Coast show there is no cause for seafood advisories or a ban on seafood consumption.